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PUBLIC BUREAUS OF EMPLOYMENT

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The subject of public employment offices just at this time is attracting a great deal of attention. This is in the main due to the large amount of unemployment throughout the United States. Unemployment in this country has gradually reached a chronic condition, through many causes which are not pertinent to discuss here. But just now we are in an acute stage, due to financial depression, the European war, etc.

All sorts of agencies are attempting to solve, or else offering a solution for, this condition. Naturally, public employment offices suggest themselves as a remedy. The present agitation has its good and bad sides. It is well to bring the subject of public employment offices to the fore, but too many people regard them in some vague way as a remedy for an acute situation, without realizing that public employment bureaus are an institution which can only be beneficial through the realization by employers and employees that they are a necessary and integral part of our industrial life. This realization has got to be a matter of growth, and will necessarily be slow. If public employment offices had been generally established in all the states twenty-five years ago, and had been carried forward with a true understanding of their work, they would today have been in a position to point out some remedies for the present situation.

A few of the states have had public employment offices for several years, and at the present time there are nineteen states which have public employment office laws, while in seven other states there are cities which have established municipal bureaus. There has, however, been no coöperation between these different bureaus, and in some of the states having several offices there has been no coöperation between the several branches in the state. In all these states the offices have been handicapped by the lack of appropriations, lack of realization of their true function, and because they have to a large extent been regarded as a political

asset. Only in four states are they under civil service, and in these the best work is being done.

The public generally has rather a low regard for employment offices of all kinds, and too often public employment offices have been regarded merely as places to handle common labor, or else to cater to the unemployable or near-unemployable. With this wrong impression as to their true use and value, appropriations were consequently very low. The same attitude toward them led to the belief that anybody, regardless of character or ability, could run an employment office. For this reason, superintendents who secured their offices in payment for political services, were too often men of limited capacity and with no very high conception of the work to which they were appointed. All this has caused this vital and necessary part of our industrial system to languish and receive little or no attention.

One of the things which indicates a revival of interest in the subject is that the matter is now being considered from a federal standpoint. Already two bills have been introduced in Congress for the establishment of a federal employment bureau. In addition, the United States Industrial Relations Commission issued, about a year ago, a tentative plan for a federal bureau, and in connection with this tentative plan a study was made of the different state employment offices now existing. This led the commission in their first report to emphasize the need of a national bureau of employment in connection with the labor department, which would coöperate with state and municipal employment offices, which would regulate private employment agencies and which would establish clearing houses for industrial information, thus uniting all public employment offices into one national system. The report refers to the imperative necessity of organizing a market for labor on a modern business basis, "So that there will be no vacant jobs and idle workers in the same community at the same time." An attempt has been made to utilize the post offices throughout the country as public employment offices. Only those who know the highly technical character of the work carried on in an employment office will understand how little can be accomplished through the post office as an employment agency.

Before public employment offices can accomplish the best results in this country, the public generally will have to be educated

to their true use and value. The experience of Germany and England has shown how real is the need for a coöperative system of public employment offices covering the entire nation.

There is in this country no organization of the labor market, and very little is known about it. In times of industrial depression all sorts of wild guesses are made as to the number of unemployed in the large cities and there is generally a demand for a "census of the unemployed." This it has always been found impossible to take accurately, and in the end each city falls back upon an estimate and hesitates about what shall be done to relieve the unemployment, because of the lack of accurate information as to the extent and character of it. We are now conceiving the possibility of registering those out of work according to their industry and trade.

The number of casual workers and those who drift about in a constant state of under-employment is greatly increasing. There are many causes for this, and the public employment offices can assist in checking this increase in two or three very definite ways.

Many thousands of dollars are spent in educating the children of the different communities. After receiving this education they are turned out of the schools at any time from their fourteenth to their twentieth year and allowed to hunt their vocation in life without well defined or intelligent direction. The child may turn to its parent, who has very limited knowledge as to the industries of his community or the country at large. If the child turns to its teacher it finds but little more help here, and so in a haphazard fashion it secures a "job." There should be in every community a central point to which the child could turn to learn all about industries, all about opportunities in staple trades and new lines of business, to know which were decaying trades, which were "blind-alley" trades and what vocation was best fitted to its education and temperament. To thus save the child from misdirection would cut off one source of supply to the great stream of casual workers. Public employment offices should also be able to give accurate information to vocational and trade schools as to what should be taught in them to meet the coming needs of the various industries. Another way in which the public employment offices could help to lessen the number of casuals would be in helping to shift workers in seasonal industries from one work to another.

Many trades and industries can be, or are, carried on for part of the year only, and when the workers leave one trade they have no central point where information can be had concerning some other trade in which they could be employed for the rest of the year. Lacking this, they drift about and soon become members of the great body of under-employed.

The under-employed and casual worker is also recruited from the ranks of those who have vainly striven to find work in their own particular trades. Barring the drug habit, there is probably no other thing so depressing to a man as the weary hunt for a job—the being turned away day after day from factory gates and offices. After a few weeks of this sort of thing, men, who under ordinary circumstances would be good and steady workmen, gradually get into such a depressed state that at last when work is found they have become unfitted to do it. Our bread lines contain many men who have gone down under this sort of depressing search.

A man seeking work today finds many avenues through which to obtain it. The most common way is to apply at the actual place of the work. This means tramping the streets of the city or riding to many parts of the community where work is going on. Or the man may answer an ad in the newspaper and find himself in line with many hundreds of other applicants. Or he may insert an ad in some newspaper and go the weary round in answer to the replies. If he is a union man he can apply to the headquarters or to the business agent of his union. If he is a non-union man, or is not opposed to working in an open shop, he can apply to the employment bureau of an employers' association. If he has a family to support and has reached the point of asking charity, he may be referred to the employment office of some charitable association. If he has a little money he may go to a private employment agency. Here he may be charged a registration fee, and if, after some delay, he is finally placed in a position, he will be made to pay anywhere from five to twenty per cent of his first month's earnings. So many varied ways cause a scattering of energies and a loss of time and money, not only to the employee and employer, but to society as a whole. The method is as primitive as the ox-team, and the inefficiency and waste is very great.

To better this method the public employment offices were created. But it must be remembered they do not and cannot

create jobs. They only seek to minimize the number of persons fruitlessly searching for work, and more quickly to bring employer and employee together. It is nevertheless true that as these public offices grow, and more and more cover the field, they in time will (through the information which they are gathering) be able to devise a method—by legislation, if necessary—whereby the worst effects of seasonal and cyclical variations in the labor market can be avoided and labor properly shifted from one part of the country to another, in compliance with a real demand for such shifting. Thereby the number of casual workers will be decreased and year-round employment made less a matter of chance and "luck."

Too much must not be expected from newly established offices. They are as yet in the "little red schoolhouse" period of their existence. It must be remembered, too, that the work in an employment office is of a highly technical character, and that there are at present very few trained workers in this field. One of the benefits of these offices will be the training of a set of workers who eventually will be capable of dealing adequately with the question of unemployment—workers who come in contact with the needs of industry on the one hand and the needs of applicants for positions on the other. It is not every man, even though he may be well trained in other lines, who can get from an employer the full description of the kind of worker wanted, and who can take that order in hand and select from the individuals in the line in front of him the one who is best fitted to fill all the demands of that position. It takes, too, a very tactful person to question the sometimes reluctant applicant for work and get from him all the information about himself necessary to know before he can be fitted into the position. Then further, public employment offices have quite a task before them in establishing themselves in the confidence of large employers of labor, and especially employers of more or less skilled workers. So general is the belief that public employment offices only handle the poorer grades of labor that most employers refuse to seek their aid. This feeling, of course, brings a disinclination on the part of efficient workers to patronize these offices.

In connection with the popular misconception of public employment offices, it might be well to call attention to the fact that the word "free" should be eliminated from all references to them. It is true their services are free, and so also are the services of the

public school. We have, however, long since outgrown the use of the term "free" in connection with the public schools. Why should we still retain it in referring to the public employment offices, and thus in an indirect way give them the odium of charity? Further, it is well to remember that these offices are just as important as the public school, and should be conducted by people with just as high qualifications as to character, ability and intelligence as are required of those who teach in our high schools and colleges.

There is now considerable discussion among those interested in public affairs concerning the regularization of industry and the establishing of unemployment insurance. Through the study of industry, which the public employment offices will have to make while carrying on their daily work, information will be gathered of great value to those who seek to regularize industry and to minimize the amount of seasonal work. If unemployment insurance is to be established it can only be worked through a coöperating system of public employment offices.

During the year 1914, the writer made a study of the public employment offices throughout the United States for the United States Industrial Relations Commission. For the past few months he has held the position of director of the state bureau of employment of the state of New York. This experience leads to the making of some suggestions to those states about to establish public employment offices, or to those desiring to improve offices already in existence.

In the first place, an adequate law will be necessary which will not enter too much into details, but which will specify only general principles, leaving details to be worked out by those placed in charge of the bureau. Such a law should call for flexible salaries, so that all employees should have the incentive of an increase in wages. Civil service should be required for all the office employees from top to bottom. Present civil service regulations and methods are, however, in most states too formal and inflexible. An ideal examination for public employment office workers should above all things take into consideration the importance of personality in selecting superintendents and other helpers. Dealing with all sorts of people requires a sympathy and understanding and a tact which is not possessed by many otherwise able persons. To insure the selection of properly qualified workers,

the director, whether of state or national bureaus, should always be a member of the examining board. Strict impartiality should be maintained as between employers and employees, especially during strikes and labor disturbances. The offices should be so conducted that neither side would have a dominating influence. Their success will depend on the friendship of employers and of organized labor, and both should be made to understand that the public employment office is a common meeting ground. It would be well for all the offices to have advisory committees. These committees should have equal representation from the ranks of organized labor and from the organizations of employers. It might also be well to have the general public represented through some of its elected officials. These committees, in addition to their main function of securing impartiality and the proper running of the offices, should also be instrumental in helping to educate the general public into a higher regard for employment offices.

The establishing of public employment offices is a part of the duty of the state (and in time it may become the duty of the federal government). At the same time offices can be better conducted if there is coöperation on the part of the cities in which such offices are located. Where the cities have a financial interest in the public offices, there is more likelihood of a hearty local interest in their success. The different offices in any one state should have a uniform system of records and a uniform system of reporting to some central bureau. The amount and kind of statistics furnished by each office will have largely to depend upon the number of workers allotted to it, and this number will, of course, depend upon the amount appropriated for the entire bureau. At the very least, however, there should be a daily report from each office of the number of applicants for work, the number of offers of positions received from employers, the number of applicants referred to positions, and the number of notifications received that positions were actually filled.

All offices should have at least two main divisions, one for men and one for women. Where the number of office employees justifies it, there should be a further division into skilled and unskilled, and as the office grows larger there should be still further division into mechanical, clerical, etc.

All budgets for employment offices should contain an item for

advertising. The amount and kind will have to be decided by each superintendent. Private agencies find it profitable to advertise and some of the best public offices advertise regularly in the daily newspapers. Then, too, nearly every public office has an opportunity to get much free advertising. Live employment offices are always a good source of news from the daily newspaper standpoint, and advantage should be taken of this to keep the office well and favorably known. No office should content itself with sending out a few cards or circulars, which are too often thrown into the waste basket.

In selecting superintendents, care should be taken to secure men of intelligence and character, men active and tactful. It should be the duty of the superintendent of each office to set aside a certain number of hours a day or a certain number of days a week in which to visit all the industries of his community, so as to get acquainted with the kind of workers demanded in the different trades. When an office becomes large enough the superintendent should be practically free from all the detail work of the office, and should spend most of his time out in the field becoming thoroughly acquainted with the proprietors of the various industries and foremen in charge of the workers. He should make them well acquainted with his office and seek to show them what it could do for both employer and employee. By thus getting fully acquainted with all the work of his community the superintendent would come to know the seasonal and varying demands of the labor market in his jurisdiction, and could prepare his office to meet impending changes in this labor market. It should be his duty to see that his subordinates properly fill the orders which he secures from employers and to know something about the way in which employers treat their employees. By thus taking a vital interest not only in the workers sent to positions, but also in the needs of employers, he would in time win the confidence and good will of both.

The law establishing the bureau of employment in the state of New York was approved in April, 1914. The director of the bureau was not appointed until the latter part of that year. The first office was established in Brooklyn on January 4, 1915. Since that time, at intervals of a few weeks, offices have been established in Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Albany. Others will be

established from time to time. The offices have, of course, been established too short a time to speak about the effect of their workings. It can, however, be said that the offices outside of Brooklyn are placing a large number of farm hands. Also, that all of the offices are handling a large amount of skilled help, much larger than might have been anticipated considering that the general idea concerning public employment offices is that they are designed only for common labor. If domestics are excluded from those placed in positions, more than 60 per cent of the places filled would belong in the class known as skilled labor. Up to this time (April 1) all the offices throughout the state have registered over 16,000 applicants for work, and have received calls from employers for over 3,400 workers. Reports have been so far received that over 1,500 of these workers were placed in positions. It must be understood that in making up these statistics no place is reported filled unless actual information is secured to that effect. A considerable number of places are in all probability filled which cannot be reported on for lack of definite information.

No printed bulletins concerning the work of the offices have yet been issued, but multigraphed bulletins have been issued at the end of each month, giving a detailed statement of the work of the offices as copy for the daily newspapers. In connection with the bureau of statistics the bureau of employment is preparing to issue a monthly labor bulletin. This bulletin will be made up from information from several sources. It will include the data from the public employment offices, data from private employment agencies, data from a certain percentage of employers in each industry in the state, the reports from labor organizations and the reports of building permits issued in each city in the state.